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ABSTRACT

Each of the four distinct ideological positions concerning the literacy problem is deficient. "Technological utopianism," the position arguing that traditional literacy standards are obsolete in the world of mass media, not only presents major conceptual and research difficulties but also suffers from the fact that its proponents, most of whom claim to follow Marshall McLuhan, do not understand his work. The Neo-Marxist position that mass media is a highly conservative force that "industrializes" the mind is inaccurate. Proponents of the back to basics movement are often entrenched academics who have something to gain from such a change. The genetic nature-nurture argument is clouded in highly emotional and controversial terms. A redefinition of literacy should take into account the fact that students are already accustomed to receiving certain types of information from certain sources (such as television) and should also address itself to the affective side of students' lives. New forms of pedagogical organization and tools might be imperative if educators are to transmit the literacy skills students need for living in a mass communications age. (JL)

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REDEFINING LITERACY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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It has become a regular 'fact' of North American Society to read articles or listen to radio and television programs debate (or more frequently 'lament') the growing illiteracy amongst the general and even elite population. This hardly includes all the school, community and academic advising committees and remedial teaching centers all highly concerned about the enormous 'literacy' problems of contemporary industrial societies.

This article will describe various perspectives on 'the great literacy debate' and provide a redefinition of the term 'literacy' so that its usage is congruent with the communications and sociological realities of a rapidly approaching 21st Century.

A glance at the wide variety of literature on the topic of 'literacy' reveals that there are at least three or four distinct ideological positions concerning the 'literacy problem':

1. The most complex, controversial and least understood position on the area of 'literacy' is what has been called 'technological utopianism'. Few critics of this stance seem to possess a penetrating understanding of the works of Marshall McLuhan -- whose name has been closely linked to this position. Briefly stated, critics state that 'technological utopianism' suggests that the mass media (particularly television) is rapidly destroying the traditional 'literacy' standards of North America while modern communications technology (particularly the 'new' electronic systems including Prestel, Qube and Telidon)

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offers unlimited possibilities for self education and personal development. Exponents of a 'new literacy' (such as Robert Disch)[1] have pointed out that a critique of traditional literacy is "long in arriving"... because...."literacy is wrapped in such a protective mantle of respectability, sanctity and presumed goodness that it has developed a powerful mystique of its own."[2] In Disch's views, middle class educators and liberal reformers, have much to lose by any critique of 'literacy' since "all place literacy and education at the center of human progress".

2. Another highly divergent approach (usually associated with Phd Academics and writers of a neo-Marxist strain) suggests that mass communications technology is responsible for the 'industrialization of the mind' and a general lowering of intellectual standards amongst all members of society from students to servants.[4]

3. Closely linked to this position is that of 'academic classicism' which claims that only by a highly traditional, analytic, critical (and sometimes drill-like) approach to education is literacy at all possible. Here literacy is defined as the ability to master the three R's and learn skills of critical analysis through the study of great works by thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle and other 'Titans' of Western culture.

4. Another position which is more 'implied' than categorically stated derives from the genetic research on intelligence of Jensen, Herrnstein and others[5] which suggests that literacy skills are to a degree dependent on I.Q. Thus, cultural, racial and socio-economic differences in I.Q. will affect the potential of the child to become literate in the fullest sense and will lead to

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[1] R. Disch, Beyond Literacy. Affirmative Education, ed. B. Schwartz, Prentice-Hall, 1972.
[2] Ibid. p. 172.
[3] Ibid. p. 173.
[4] H.A. Giroux, 'Mass Culture and Rise of New Illiteracy'- Implications for Learning Interchange, p. 89-95.
[5]

major learning difficulties in acquiring mathematical and literacy skills.

The first position of 'technological utopianism' presents major conceptual and research difficulties since there is hardly a credible writer on the topic of literacy who would make the claim that electronic media will lead to a cultural utopia.

Rossi[6] has a highly developed discussion of the role of media in the development of literacy but most writers are extremely cautious to state that it is within the 'context' of how the actual technology is applied which is significant to the development or retardation of literacy and not the existence of communications technology itself. (Marshall McLuhan, a highly academically qualified, highly religious communications theorist, firmly believed that the very existence of the electronic media drastically changed our intellectual emotive and visual perceptions, but hardly propagated the elimination of literacy.) In the most blunt terms, McLuhan was a 'prober' and hardly a preacher.

Unfortunately, amongst too many academic elitists who possess only the most vague knowledge concerning McLuhan's work, he is the 'strawman' who is inevitably carricatured as the progenitor of ideas which would destroy the basis of Western literacy and herald an age of anti-intellectual barbarism, (McLuhan's short appearance in a Woody Allen's film castigating a Professor of Communication theory for teaching a course about McLuhan which the instructor himself hardly

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[6] Rossi P. Biddle, The New Media and Education. Doubleday & Co., 1966.

understands) is probably one way McLuhan immortalized his disdain of some of his 'interpreters'.[7]

The Neo-Marxist and scholarly position that the mass media is a highly conservative force which 'industrializes' the mind is an exaggeration of the situation. Surely, since most North American television stations and newspapers are financed by commercial advertising and administered by capitalist institutions which desire to appeal to the largest possible audience it is obvious that a majority of examples can be found of 'reification' of values rather than 'alternative perspectives' and radical proposals for change. Yet, it is the mass media in the form of the soft cover book and television discussion programs which brought hundreds of 'new' ideas about the liberation of the woman, sexuality and the family structure, as well as critical perspectives on the administration of government and warfare such as the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War. Even the highly popular series 'All In the Family' created a context where liberal versus conservative views were constantly brought to the attention of millions of viewers. The emergence of hundreds of cable television channels and the potential of home computers (described in some detail by Alvin Toffler in the Third Wave) almost eliminates the possibility of the 'industrialization of the mind by providing enormous opportunities for divergent news and cultural choice.

5. Fervent advocates of a return to the 'basics' are usually highly entrenched in the professional and academic bureaucracy and have their own personal and intellectual stake in this position. Most traditionalists hardly engage in any carefully considered analysis of the present state of technological

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[7] Stearn, G. McLuhan, Hot and Cool, New American Library, 1969.

society but prefer to engage in a form of academic 'name calling' where once again Marshall McLuhan and most members of the modern mass communications media are perfunctorily discarded as superficial and anti-intellectual forces.[8]

(The cultural obsession with literacy is so entrenched that many members of the lower socio-economic classes regard the three R's as a sacred vehicle of upward mobility and social status. Recently a 4-year-old was locked away in a closet because she wouldn't learn her ABC's and her parents have been charged with criminal abuse.)

Traditionalists in the academic and professional organizations have the most to gain by perpetuating the idea that only 'classical' 'literate' knowledge constitutes an authentic educational background. A closer reading of Socrates would have made them realize that Socrates himself was not so convinced that literate written knowledge was the key to wisdom. (See Phaedo)[9]

6. The genetic nature-nurture argument is clouded in highly emotional and controversial terms since some of these findings cast disparagement on various racial and socio-economic groupings. Yet (without making any attempt to enter into this inflammatory area of race and I.Q.) some findings concerning differences between various groups in our society could begin to provide us with some consideration of the fact that 'learning' among differing racial and cultural groups might require new pedagogical styles and curricular creativity. Philosophical issues which emanate from this debate hinge on whether curriculars and educationists are concerned with sustaining a competitive situation where only those individuals possessing certain skills and aptitudes are rewarded by status and other economic

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[8]Ibid. pg. 218-219.
[9]Plato - The Phaedo

incentives or whether a "humanistic" educational program concerned with a wide variety of learning needs and interests could emerge. A pluralistic complex technological society (which will provide an increasing amount of leisure in the future due to automation) would seem to require a much more broadly based definition of literacy than presently exists.

REDEFINING LITERACY

In broad terms, literacy can be defined as on the one hand the acquisition of knowledge and skills concerning letters, words, the numbers system, etc. or as a description of a well-rounded individual who can converse on a wide variety of socially and philosophically relevant topics. In my own view and from my research on my own students' motivation towards developing literacy skills [redacted] it would appear that a viable approach to developing literacy skills would demand a 'rethinking of curricular possibilities and certain areas of concern which have been largely neglected by the traditional curriculum. Some of McLuhan's interpreters (Barrington Nevitt)[10] have suggested that research be carried out on the physiological changes in the nervous system created by the electronic media.[11] It is a hypothetical suggestion that these technological 'extensions of man' might dull students' interest in dealing with certain kinds of conceptual material thus making traditional teaching extremely difficult if not actually dangerous .

A basic assumption all teachers can make about their students is that they have already spent thousands of hours watching television. Is it possible that this type of over-exposure to television could have led to a distinct

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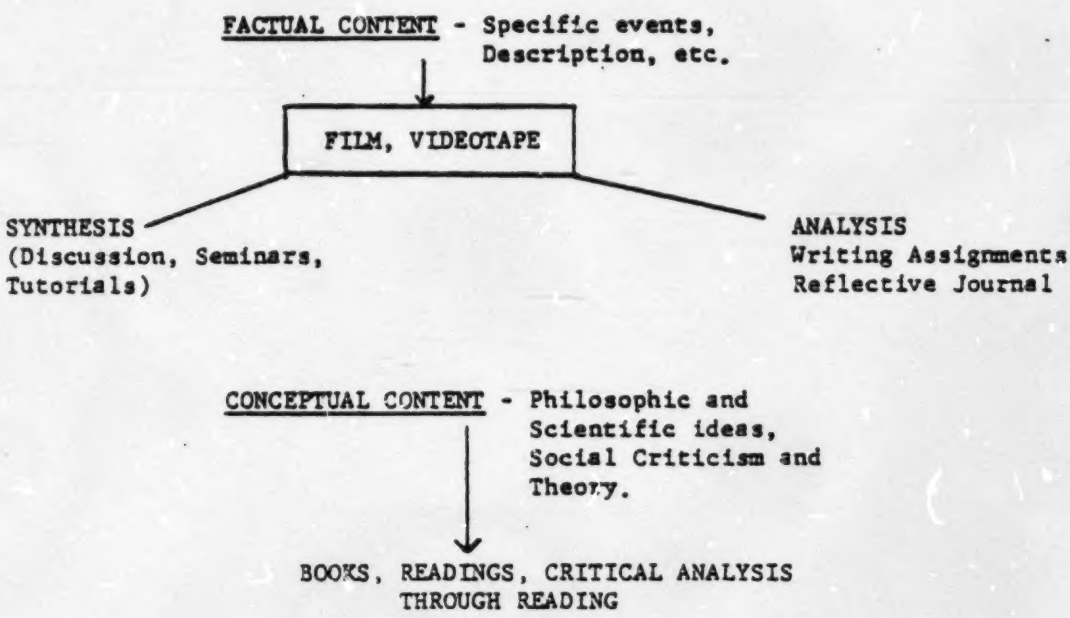
[10] B. Nevitt, The ABC of Prophecy, Toronto, 1981.

[11] Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol. 7, No. 3.

'boredom' with certain types of information (hypothetically speaking) while developing a deep hunger for <u>different</u> types of content and concerns? In addition, is it possible that the ordinary media (such as television) might be an absolute pedagogical necessity for disseminating certain kinds of information (since students have become accustomed to this form of learning) while other levels of information (particularly conceptual and philosophical information) would require reading, critical analysis, and discussion? In a society where learning is 'congruent' with the technological inventions available curriculumists must begin to study levels of information and students' level of abstraction and their relationship to various pedagogical and learning styles.

Diagrammatically, this hypothesis might resemble the following:


FACTUAL CONTENT - Specific events, Description, etc.
FILM, VIDEOTAPE
SYNTHESIS (Discussion, Seminars, Tutorials)
ANALYSIS Writing Assignments Reflective Journal
CONCEPTUAL CONTENT - Philosophic and Scientific ideas, Social Criticism and Theory.
BOOKS, READINGS, CRITICAL ANALYSIS THROUGH READING

A redefinition of literacy does not imply a simplistic emotionally charged dichotomy between media and traditional academic skills of reading, analysis and synthesis, but rather a profound understanding of the sociological and physiological factors involved in modern critical learning. Paulo Friere has already pointed out how important 'meaning' and 'context' is for the acquisition of literacy. My own decade of teaching experience dealing with students' values in the course 'In search of value' documents the importance of creating a 'meaningful frame of reference' to motivate students to engage in developing their intellectual and critical skills through reading, writing and discussion.[12] The ability to discern the themes which provide meaning for students require that curriculaists and educators become actively involved in learning about the 'Affective' side of their students' lives. This search for the 'affective' side of students would include an understanding of the 'self' in process of moral and ethical development and how values change after exposure to various kinds of information (Rokeach)[13], the relationship of media to students' perception of themselves and their work (McLuhan, Carpenter)[14]. It is conceivable that a redefinition of literacy in the future could include literacy of the senses, cultural literacy, (knowledge of 'self' in relationship to social organization) and philosophic and anthropological literacy, knowledge of alternative epistemologies and paradi ms, lateral or divergent thinking (De Bono)[15] At the World Conference on Gifted Education (Montreal, 1981) Dr. De Bono pointed

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[12] H. Wagschal, Values - Education - Towards A Theory and Practice of Cultural Transformation, ERIC Washington, D.C., 1979.

[13] Rokeach, Beliefs, Attitudes and Values, Jossey Bass, 1972.

[14] McLuhan, Carpenter, Explorations in Communications, Beacon Press.

[15] De Bono, Beyond Yes and No, Penguin, 1979.

out that a high I.Q. does not necessarily mean that one knows how to think.

New forms of pedagogical organization and tools might be imperative if we are to fulfill the requirement of a broadening conception of literacy. These might include appropriate usage of media, a biographical log or journal linking students' life experiences with forms of common social organization (family, school, church) and various techniques for stimulating group discussion and oral presentations by students.

CONCLUSION

This article has tried to delineate various contemporary perspectives on the topic of 'literacy' in industrialized societies as well as briefly discuss some of the social and educational implications created by these varying ideological positions. The article also suggested that a redefinition of the term literacy was an intellectual and sociological necessity if our conceptions of the 'literate' person were to be congruent with present 'realities' in the field of mass communications and the massive changes in perception created by electronic media and new ways of acquiring information.

Yet many questions still must be considered concerning the social class divisions created by the communications revolution, the physiological changes in human nervous system and the threat of 'information overload' and intellectual superficiality. It might even be suggested that reading and writing might become 'tools' for a small group of academics, journalists, etc. while the masses of individuals communicate orally and amass most of their information from television and radio and much less frequently from books and newspapers.

As a portent of the 'literacy future' which might be here much sooner than one could imagine here is a clipping from the St. Petersberg Times' encouraging readers to communicate with the editor.

SHARE YOUR VIEWS

THE TIMES hotline is regularly open 24 hours a day for readers who wish to dictate a letter or message to the editor. (It's best not to call between 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. when the tape is being transcribed.)

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